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Orland Park Police Fifth in Nation to Receive FAA Approval to Operate Drone in Class G Airspace



The Orland Park Police Department is the fifth police department in the United States to receive a Blanket Area Public Safety Certificate of Authorization from the Federal Aviation Administration for its drone. Orland Park was also the first municipal police department in the State of Illinois to receive Federal Aviation Administration permission to operate a drone for training purposes.

"Orland Park is more than 22 square miles of land with many bodies of water and bordered by forest preserves," said Mayor Dan McLaughlin. "Having a drone makes it easier to find missing people and suspects in crimes. This new certification also enables our department to help other agencies when they need it."

The blanket area authorization enables Orland Park to operate its drone in Class G Airspace in any jurisdiction, if requested by local authorities, as long as it is not within five nautical miles of an airport.

For public aircraft operations, the FAA issues a Certificate of Waiver or Authorization (COA) that permits public agencies and organizations to operate a particular aircraft for a particular purpose in a particular area. The COA allows an operator to use a defined block of airspace and includes special safety provisions unique to the proposed operation. COAs usually are issued for a specific period – up to two years in many cases.

"The Orland Park Police Department has already responded to seven missing and endangered persons calls in the first quarter of this year – three adults and four juveniles," noted Chief Tim McCarthy. "The drone will enable our officers to cover large areas of field and bodies of water to assist with any search."

Orland Park's latest COA permits the department to fly its drone at an altitude that does not exceed 400 feet or within five nautical miles of an airport.

"The Orland Park Police Department is always planning ahead and their being among the first police agencies to receive these authorizations is another example of how very progressive our police department is," McLaughlin added.

The department's use of its drone is governed by the Freedom From Drone Surveillance Act. The act restricts the use of drones to counter a high risk of a terrorist attack; if a law enforcement agency first obtains a search warrant based on probable cause; if swift action is needed to prevent imminent harm to life or to prevent the escape of a suspect or the destruction of evidence; if looking for a missing person; for crime scene and traffic crash photography or during a disaster or public health emergency.

"The Certificate of Authorization is a two year license that is drone specific," explained McCarthy. "Other agencies have used drones and being able to provide an aerial view has

been invaluable in search and rescue situations, tactical, emergency response, hazardous incidents and investigative cases.”

The department received a grant from the Region 7 Health Care Coalition to purchase its drone.

The Federal Aviation Administration requires that officers complete the private pilot ground school and successfully pass the FAA private pilot written examination in order to fly the drone. The drones may not fly higher than 400 feet as operators monitor the flight patterns for Midway and O’Hare Airports. The FAA is responsible for ensuring the safe operation of any aircraft within the National Airspace System.

One Orland Park police supervisor and five officers have completed the training and arduous FAA written examination certification process.

“This is another example of the Orland Park Police Department utilizing technology to protect the people of Orland Park,” said Trustee Dan Calandriello, chair of the village’s Public Safety Committee. “The training that our officers have undergone is especially important in order to safely, legally and effectively use the drone. It will be a priceless tool during searches for lost children or missing adults or seniors --- especially in the nearby forest preserves and parks.”

Because of its size, many small unmanned aircraft systems can be transported in the trunk of a patrol car and quickly deployed at an incident. With a hazardous materials incident, the drones can quickly deliver an aerial view of the scene, providing enhanced situational awareness and allowing first responders to develop an effective response while documenting the scene for subsequent investigation.

Orland Park Police Lieutenant Joe Mitchell oversaw the department’s grant and authorization process.

“We began the process last May and it was very involved to receive FAA certification,” Mitchell said. “We now have certified staff who are able to operate the department’s drone.”

Reiterating the benefits, the mayor said, “There are many cases where a drone will help police on the ground --- if a child gets lost, if a fugitive takes off on foot, if a disabled resident wanders off or if first responders need to survey an inaccessible area. A drone can really make a huge difference.”